The Confessional Imagination

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The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude.


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Told's narrative, besides being one of the most readable and novelistic of confessions, is an intensely interesting example of the power of the Edenic ideal of language and of the complex problem of the two consciousnesses from which this idea is generated. It is a double narrative, in which Told relates his life history once from a realistic, autobiographical viewpoint (in which he frequently attains a tone combining elements of Defoe and Smollett) and once again from the viewpoint of the numinous, literally reshaping the first narrative into a history of his approach to God. The meeting point of the two narratives is his encounter with an evangelical bricklayer in 1736:

Here my readers will permit me to enter upon my religious life, and therefore I think it prudent to revert back to my earliest days; and as I have already in the beginning set forth the manner and mystery of God's working upon my soul, to the time of my admission into Edward Colson's Hospital, so I shall occasionally intersperse my changes of station in this life, as well as those of a spiritual nature.1

Here the two consciousnesses and the confessional speech which is their unification are literally and simultaneously present in the book.

Since Told was a very atypical Methodist (personally an amusing but outrageous snob and religiously a violent visionary), his confession betrays more than is usual the effort involved in attaining the right language of conversion. He cannot quite bring himself to the truly Edenic, christological narration of his past before he has given that other I a full projection on its own disjunctive, rowdy, and swashbuckling terms. And Told’s narrative proper concludes with a truly brilliant passage in which he finally achieves the full Edenic language of confession in an experience with strangely Wordsworthian overtones. After his conversion, he experiences one final series of temptations to disbelieve his own election, and in agony he walks alone into a field, wishing himself a dog, a cow, a murdered man, anything insensate and unconscious. It is not difficult to see that he is in fact experiencing the perpetual disease involved in consciousness, the disease attendant upon trying to be one’s whole self, past as well as present. Then he finds a secluded spot in the field:

When I had secluded myself therein, being alone, on a sudden, in the twinkling of an eye, “a hand struck me a weighty blow on the top of my head,” which in some measure affected my senses; but I instantly found myself crying with a loud voice, “Praise God, praise God,” and, looking up, I beheld the ethereal universe, replete with the Glory of God. . . .

The temporary deprivation of sense and sudden access of phenomenal vision are, of course, by now recognizable and profound Wordsworthian locutions—here some twenty years before Wordsworth’s major poetry. But the incalculably brilliant insight in this passage, by a man of anything but a reflective temperament, is involved in the phrase in quotation marks, “a hand struck me a weighty blow on the top of my head.” It is a quotation—from the other I of Told’s own past self, referring to his earliest religious experience at twelve years of age:

Sitting one day in my order, and reading Sherlock on Death. I suddenly laid down the book, leaned my right elbow on my right knee, and with my hand supporting my head, and I meditated in the most solemn thought, upon the awfulness of eternity: Suddenly

2. Ibid., p. 85.
I was struck with a hand on the top of my head, followed by a voice with these words, “Dark! dark! dark!” and although it alarmed me prodigiously, yet, upon the recovery from so sudden a motion, I found myself broad awake in a world of sin.\(^3\)

The later passage, in which, memorially and verbally, Told is able to align his present state with the experience of the twelve-year-old Silas, represents a triumph of language and refinement of psychic power which transforms the long intervening period of guilt and transgression into a testimony to the redemptive power of God and the individual religious memory of the confessor. And it leads immediately afterward to a nearly apocalyptic vision of the one man which is the Christian communal self as the redeemer not only of the soul but of time past:

And immediately some articulate voice asked me the following question: “How did you find yourself an hour ago?” I then recollected that I was in a wretched and lost state. The voice again suggested, “All the world is but as one man, and one man as all the world.”\(^4\)

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3. Ibid., p. 62.
4. Ibid., p. 87.